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SUBJECT: NGO AND POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS SHARE CONCERNS
WITH EUR A/S FRIED

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During his November 4 meetings with NGO and political party leaders, EUR A/S Fried noted the importance of a strong Azerbaijan with strong democratic institutions. Although it is not always popular with the GOAJ, he said that Azerbaijan's democratic development would remain a priority for the U.S. Leaders of Azerbaijan's key NGOs outlined many concerns, including problems with freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, religious freedom, and torture of detainees. They also expressed frustration that the GOAJ has not implemented many of the Council of Europe's recommendations. The opposition political party leaders shared similar concerns, noting democratic backsliding since the 2005 parliamentary elections. One pro-government party member said that democratic development could not be discussed until the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is resolved. Ruling party Executive Secretary Ali Ahmadov said the GOAJ's main concern was keeping people happy. A/S Fried noted that the GOAJ can use its oil revenue to achieve higher-scale corruption with weak institutions or a democratic state with strong institutions; the chosen direction remains to be seen. END SUMMARY

CIVIL SOCIETY'S CONCERNS

12. (C) On November 4, the Ambassador hosted a tea for visiting EUR A/S Fried with leaders from Azerbaijan's key NGOs. Guests included Association for the Protection of Women's Rights Chair Novella Jafaroglu; Bureau for the Respect of Human Rights and Law Chair Saida Gojamanly; ISHR Azerbaijan branch Chair Saadat Benanyarly; Murad Sadaddinov and Rena Sadaddinova, respective chair and deputy chair of the Azerbaijan Foundation of Democratic Development and Human Rights Protection; Helsinki Citizens Assembly Azerbaijan branch Chair Arzu Abdullayeva; Institute for Peace and Democracy Chair Leyla Yunus; Azerbaijan Committee against Torture Chair Elchin Behbudov; Institute for Reporter Freedom and Safety Chair Emin Huseynov; and Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan Chair Eldar Zeynalov. A/S Fried opened by telling the group that he had discussed Azerbaijan's democratic development with President Aliyev, specifically the 2008 presidential election and the case of jailed journalist Eynulla Fatullayev. He said that without democratic development, U.S.-Azerbaijani relations would not be as strong or lasting as they should be; without reform, Azerbaijan will not succeed.

13. (C) Arzu Abdullayeva shared her concern over deteriorating freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and now religious freedom, noting her perception of increased tension between religious groups. For example, she said that for the first

time, Christian groups are being targeted. Abdullayeva believes that the decline in religious freedom is part of a political plan connected to State Committee for Work with Religious Associations Chair Hidayat Orujov. According to Abdullayeva, while the political opposition has become weaker, civil society remains strong. Abdullayeva explained that she is forming a new Democracy Council, to be comprised of intellectuals and civil society representatives, which will be announced on December 10, International Human Rights Day. Emin Huseynov said that civil society needs to move beyond simply defending itself and begin taking pro-active measures against the government. He believes that the GOAJ first targeted the media, and is now moving on to civil society.

14. (C) Elchin Behbudov rised concerns over Eynulla Fatullayev, the already-imprisoned journalist who received an eight-year-six-month imprisonment sentence on October 30 on charges of supporting terrorism, inciting ethnic hatred, and tax evasion (reftel). Behbudov noted that the length of Fatullayev's sentence is comparable to murder charges. He said that Azerbaijan is not fulfilling its commitments with the Council of Europe (COE); rather, the GOAJ is responsible for numerous human rights abuses, including torture of detainees, at times resulting in death. According to Behbudov, "there is a curtain through which one must look to see Azerbaijan for what it is: a rotten apple." Saida Gojamanly echoed Behbudov's comment about the GOAJ's implementation of its COE commitments, noting the GOAJ's failure to implement the Parliamentary Assembly of the COE's recommendations on Azerbaijan as outlined in an April resolution, including changes to the electoral code and finding a solution to the political prisoner problem.

BAKU 00001355 002 OF 005

15. (C) Novella Jafaroglu outlined a list of problems, saying that there is no political opposition in Azerbaijan, people are "running towards Islam," and prices are increasing parallel to corruption. According to Jafaroglu, former President Heydar Aliyev "gave ministers the chance to earn up to a million dollars, but then they had to stop." Now, she said, they have free reign; although President Ilham Aliyev had the opportunity to implement reforms, he was "surrounded by gangsters" and has become one of them. Gojamanly added that Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev advises the President "not to listen to the international community." Eldar Zeynalov said that because of their immense wealth, each minister had the power to stabilize the country, but they choose to perpetuate the corrupt situation to make money. Referring to President Aliyev, he said "I don't think he is so naive; he knows everything that happens in this country." Zeynalov agreed with Jafaroglu that some ministers "didn't get their cut during Heydar's rule, but they're getting it now." According to Zeynalov "it would be easier to obtain Azerbaijan's military secrets than to find out who owns what." He concluded that many of Azerbaijan's shortcomings could be resolved by the creation of a real free market economy.

16. (C) Murad Sadaddinov turned to the deteriorating media situation, saying that he does not believe the GOAJ will pardon the seven imprisoned journalists - whom he views as "hostages in a political game" - in the near future. He noted the need for the U.S. and the international community to come down hard on the GOAJ: "You expressed dissatisfaction with the situation, but the government doesn't think concrete actions will follow." Sadaddinov expressed concern that the GOAJ is now using every means possible to control civil society. He did not agree with his colleagues' assessment that the opposition is weak, noting that the Azerbaijani opposition remains more active than in other countries despite the difficult operating environment. Sadaddinov believes that the Azerbaijani population is generally opposed to the current government. Saadat Benanyarly touched upon property rights, referring to the

increasing trend of people losing their homes when the Ministry of Emergency Situations declares buildings to be unstable. She also noted a need for civil society and the opposition to receive television airtime.

17. (C) Leyla Yunus claimed that the international community has given President Aliyev a "carte blanche" to do what he wants. She said that the GOAJ is using political Islam as an excuse to crack down on religious groups, noting particular concern over a group of 15 persons believed to be Iranian spies, whom the GOAJ prevented human rights monitors from visiting during eight months of their detention. Yunus cautioned that an anti-American attitude is gaining steam in Azerbaijan, mirrored by the pro-Western opposition vanishing. She questioned President Aliyev's true popularity, asking "If he's so sure he will be elected, why not allow freedom of speech and freedom of assembly? Why not allow the opposition access to the electronic media?" Yunus said that a situation has arisen in which, should there be an incident of terrorism, "public opinion would be on the side of the terrorist, not the victim, because no one supported democratic reforms." She said she was afraid the GOAJ has left no room for peaceful change. According to Yunus, President Aliyev believes the international community is more interested in Azerbaijan's geo-political situation and oil than its democratization; she said that if the U.S. coordinates with the EU, the OSCE, and the COE to show Aliyev otherwise, "changes will follow."

18. (C) A/S Fried said that the GOAJ can use its oil revenue to go in one of two directions: higher-scale corruption with weak institutions and "rent-seeking behavior," or strengthened institutions, including democratic reform, a free-market economy, and greater political space. He noted that in some other countries, oil money has been able to support a government for a certain period of time, but eventually social and economic stresses weaken it. The question remains, said A/S Fried, will Azerbaijan use the oil revenue to support reform or repression? The U.S. wants a strong Azerbaijan, he continued, but a strong Azerbaijan has to have a strong population and strong institutions, not just a strong group of elites making all the decisions and keeping all the money. A/S Fried said that civil society must keep doing what it is doing, in spite of the difficult operating environment. He said that he would encourage the opposition to reach out to society and strengthen its position to find a way to be effective. To the GOAJ, he said, he would say that a free election makes them stronger, and a weak election makes them weaker. A/S Fried noted the U.S.' difficult position: maintaining hostile relations with the GOAJ would

BAKU 00001355 003 OF 005

accomplish nothing, and ignoring the democratic shortcomings would not work. That left the U.S. somewhere in the middle, he said, "We want to work with the GOAJ, but at the same time push it to act in its long-term interests," which he said would always make the GOAJ a little unhappy. The Assistant Secretary closed, saying "We want Azerbaijan to develop a

SIPDIS

little like Turkey, and a little like Eastern Europe, not like Uzbekistan or Russia, where oil money is fueling corruption and aggression."

LUNCH WITH POLITICAL PARTY HEADS

19. (U) Separately on November 4, the Ambassador hosted a lunch for A/S Fried with political party leaders. Guests included Yeni Azerbaijan Party Executive Secretary Ali Ahmadov; Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar; Popular Front Party Chair Ali Kerimli; Azerbaijan Liberal Party Leader Lala Shovket; Yeni Siyaset Bloc President Eldar Namazov; Justice Party Chair Ilyas Ismayilov; Hope Party Chair Iqbal Agazade; and Civil Solidarity Party Chair Sabir Rustemkhanli. A/S Fried opened by stating that the U.S. cares very much about

Azerbaijan, and wants to see it as a strong, sovereign country, with strong institutions such as independent courts, and a free media. A strong president, he continued, is one who has a democratic mandate, whose legitimacy cannot be questioned. A/S Fried said that Azerbaijan is becoming very rich, very fast, and the oil revenue can either propel reform or promote corruption. He said that in a undemocratic system, leaders have to depend on outside support, internal security forces, or both. While Russia is afraid that the U.S. is trying to stir up "color revolutions" in the region, A/S Fried continued, in truth we want to see strength through democratic evolution. "We are bothered by the number of journalists in prison" he said. "Former President Heydar Aliyev established a truly independent state, and I hope that President Ilham Aliyev uses his power to establish a strong, modern state with strong institutions." A/S Fried said that a weak Azerbaijan would be a strategic disaster; it would be vulnerable to radicalism, and forced to rely on outside support, which Iran and Russia would be happy to provide.

¶10. (C) Ali Ahmadov said that the ruling party also wants to see Azerbaijan as a strong state, which does not necessarily mean only a strong leadership. To him, it includes strong institutions, a stronger opposition, and a society in which people live well. Ahmadov said that the GOAJ is not naive, that it realizes it can only stay strong if people are living well. He said that he would like to see Azerbaijan's economic potential be used for its people, who can use the wealth to secure a democratic future. "I'm not claiming there are no problems here, but we're doing as much as possible to resolve them," Ahmadov stated. He said that the GOAJ wants Azerbaijan to be strong on its own, not being dictated by another country. For example, Ahmadov said that Azerbaijan's decision to supply Georgia with gas after Russia raised gas prices demonstrated that Azerbaijan "won't play by others' rules." Ahmadov questioned how anyone can discuss human rights in Azerbaijan without considering the situation of one million IDPs/refugees. While the ruling party also is concerned by the number of journalists behind bars, Ahmadov said "we have to find a compromise," because many journalists have offended and slandered others. "We just want to prosper and make friends" he concluded.

¶11. (C) Lala Shovket said that unfortunately, the same problems she conveyed to A/S Fried during his October 2005 visit to Baku remained problems today, but had become worse. She said that Azerbaijan is moving step-by-step towards an authoritarian regime, not a democracy. Shovket noted particular concern with the freedom of expression situation, including the continuing pressure on independent journalists and the seven journalists who remain in prison. Until 2004, she continued, Freedom House ranked Azerbaijan "partially free," but since 2005, the country has been listed as "not free." Shovket concluded by pointing out that the GOAJ has still not implemented the COE Venice Commission's recommendations for changes to the electoral code. Iqbal Agazade said that a democratic system would allow the opposition parties to come to the table, and noted that currently, there is no opposition representation in most public institutions. He noted a need for state financing of political parties, and said the electoral code must be amended to allow opposition parties representation on election commissions. Freedom of assembly has been deteriorating for years, Agazade continued, and now the opposition has to go to the most remote parts of town to hold any sort of rally. He said that Parliament has very limited powers; even if the whole body agreed on something, the GOAJ would still act as it pleased. "How are we supposed to

BAKU 00001355 004 OF 005

become stronger?" Rustemkhanli asked.

¶12. (C) Isa Gambar complained that the GOAJ is full of great intentions, but they remained only intentions. For example, he said that the GOAJ's anti-corruption commission has not been effective, largely due to the fact that the "top

corrupted official," Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, is the commission's leader. Gambar feared that the GOAJ would continue its trend towards repression, noting that there are no independent courts, no independent parliament, and no independent TV stations to provide any sort of oversight. He believes that this has created a greater opportunity for officials to steal. Gambar said that the GOAJ is trying to create the impression that the government is strong, and the opposition is weak, but he asked, "If the government is so strong, why is Ilham Aliyev so afraid of holding democratic elections? Why are so many journalists behind bars? Why don't TV stations give airtime to the opposition? Why do they limit any of our actions to talk to the population and hold any sort of rally?" Gambar concluded by stating that should a real election be held, President Aliyev would lose.

¶13. (C) Ali Kerimli noted concern with democratic backsliding in Azerbaijan, which he said is reflected in international reports on the country such as those by Freedom House, Transparency International, and the OSCE. While the USG has repeatedly urged the GOAJ to implement democratic reforms, Kerimli said that the public has only heard these statements come out in the past year. Before that, he claimed, all statements applauded the GOAJ for taking specific steps towards democracy. Kerimli believes the situation in Azerbaijan to be worse than that in Belarus, Pakistan, and Burma, where governments recently "have at least allowed people to peacefully assemble." The GOAJ, however, does not take recommendations from the U.S. and the international community seriously, he said, especially regarding pressure on the political opposition.

¶14. (C) Eldar Namazov said that democracy severely has declined in Azerbaijan since the 2005 parliamentary elections, and that the country cannot afford to follow its current track for another six years, which he described as the remaining year in President Aliyev's current term and the five-year term he will likely serve after the 2008 election. The result, Namazov cautioned, would be catastrophic. He believes that under the current system, the oil revenue and the increasing influence of political Islam will prevent Azerbaijan from democratizing. Namazov said the most important thing to consider is how Azerbaijan can achieve as soft of a shift to democracy as possible. The solution, he said, is to develop a consensus program to incorporate the interests of the GOAJ, the opposition, and the business elite. Namazov noted that he would participate in the December 10 event (mentioned earlier by Arzu Abdullayeva) to announce the creation of a Democracy Council.

¶15. (C) Ilyas Ismayilov said that while he would like Azerbaijan to be democratic, rule of law is inherent to democracy. While part of Azerbaijan's territory remains "occupied by terrorists," how can we talk about democracy, he asked. "We're speaking as if democracy is the only problem here," Ismayilov continued, "but this violation of sovereignty is the main problem. We can't talk about development until the U.S. stops supporting Armenia." Sabir Rustemkhanli noted his discomfort with this discussion and previous similar discussions with visiting U.S. officials, because "We look like kids complaining about the situation at home." Only Azerbaijanis, he continued, ultimately will be responsible for building democracy, but instead of uniting, the split in the opposition continues to deepen. He said that sometimes the ruling party is not even involved in the GOAJ's "political games," just a small circle of rich individuals. Rustemkhanli noted the need for constitutional changes to empower Parliament to make real decisions; state financing of political parties; and a political dialogue between the parties. He said that year by year, people are losing trust in democracy, and actions like the Armenian "genocide" resolution in the U.S. Congress and the situation with the PKK in Iraq "did not help improve the U.S. image in people's minds."

¶16. (C) In response to the points raised on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, A/S Fried stated "The U.S. did not

start this war and we're not responsible for this war, but we are taking some responsibility in trying to reach a solution that both Azerbaijan and Armenia can work with. We will not support a settlement that Azerbaijan can't support." Regardless, he said that Azerbaijan cannot use the conflict for an excuse not to reform. Turning to the resolution on

BAKU 00001355 005 OF 005

the 1915 events in Turkey characterized by Armenia as "genocide," the Assistant Secretary said that it was a counterproductive resolution, which was why the Bush administration had opposed it. Regarding the PKK situation in Iraq, he said "An enemy of Turkey is an enemy of the U.S." and noted that Turkish Prime Minister was traveling to Washington to discuss steps the U.S. and Turkey can take together to resolve the problem. A/S Fried said that Eldar Namazov's comment on a consensus was interesting, and noted a need for a dialogue between the GOAJ and the opposition. He said that he understood Ali Ahmadov's concerns about unprofessional journalists, but reiterated "There has to be a better way of dealing with this than throwing journalists in jail." The Assistant Secretary closed by noting that everyone - the opposition, NGOs, and the GOAJ - agreed that Azerbaijan's strategic orientation should be to the West; "We will support Azerbaijan and any country that a democratic process gives us. I hope you're all a part of that."

COMMENT

¶17. (C) During A/S Fried's discussion with political party leaders, it was clear that the outlook of the opposition is sharply divided between the traditional opposition (Ali Kerimli and Isa Gambar) and former Heydar Aliyev officials now in the opposition (Eldar Namazov). All spoke of the difficulties of political parties during Ilham Aliyev's rule, but Namazov focused on trying to build a consensus on concrete steps to move forward. Other party leaders were content to say that as long as Ilham Aliyev remained in power, nothing would change. Similarly, the NGO community is divided between some organizations who appear paralyzed by government inaction on human rights, while others are actively searching for a way forward in this difficult environment.

¶18. (U) A/S Fried cleared this message.
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